



# JESUS, OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

*SERIES: THE TABERNACLE: GOD'S PRESENCE WITH HIS PEOPLE*

Exodus 28:1-43

Sixth Message

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God's desire is to dwell with his people: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." So he instructs Moses to have the people build him a dwelling place in their midst:

**"And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it." (Exod 25:8-9 ESV)**

The tabernacle is a sanctuary; it is holy space for a holy God. But how can a holy God live in the presence of a sinful, unclean people? They need protecting from each other, lest God's holiness consume his people in their sin and uncleanness, or their sin and uncleanness defile his sanctuary, his holy space. Last week we saw that the two screens and the veil that guarded the way into the courtyard, into the tent, and into the Most Holy Place served more as barriers than as entrances. They kept out more people than they allowed in. But there was a group who could enter into the courtyard, who could approach the altar of burnt offering, and who could enter into the tent itself. Of this group there was one person who could enter all the way into the Most Holy Place. These people were the priests, set aside to minister in the sanctuary. A priest is a mediator, someone who comes between the holy and the unholy. God appointed the priests to be intermediaries between him and his people, between his holy presence and their uncleanness and sin.

**"Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar." (28:1)**

God chose Moses' brother Aaron and his four sons to be set aside to serve him as priests in his sanctuary. They alone would be able to approach the altar of burnt offering, there to offer up the sacrifices of the people. They alone would be able to enter the tent, there to tend to the lampstand and to the bread of presence on the table. Aaron alone as high priest would be able to enter the Most Holy Place, once a year. When the tabernacle was set up not even Moses was able to enter the sanctuary; he was not a priest.

The priests were mediators between God and his people. In one direction they served the Lord as priests in his sanctuary. Handling the sacrifices and tending to the furniture in the Holy Place was their service to the Lord. All Israel was called to serve the Lord, but this was the particular service of the priests: to attend to the holy things in the holy place. In the other direction they served the people as their representatives within the sanctuary, so that the people in their sin and uncleanness not enter the sanctuary and defile its holiness. The people would bring their sacrificial offerings to the entrance of the courtyard and hand them over to the priests who would sacrifice them on their behalf. The people themselves could not offer sacrifices. When Israel later had a king, not even the king could offer sacrifices; Saul did so and it cost him the throne.

To perform this priestly service within the sanctuary, this holy work within the holy space, both Aaron and his sons would need special garments:

**"And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty. You shall speak to all the skillful, whom I have filled with a spirit of skill, that they make Aaron's garments to consecrate him for my priesthood. These are the garments that they shall make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a coat of checker work, a turban, and a sash. They shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons to serve me as priests. They shall receive gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen." (28:2-5)**

These were no ordinary garments. They were holy garments, sacred vestments. They were to be worn only within the holy space of the sanctuary. These vestments visually distinguished the priests from the people, the priests inside the sanctuary from the laity outside the sanctuary. These vestments required special manufacture. They were to be made by skilled artisans whom God himself had filled with wisdom.

As high priest Aaron would have a unique set of vestments, distinct from the other priests. His high-priestly vestments comprised eight items: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a tunic, a turban, and a sash (v. 3), a gold plate (v. 36) and underwear (v. 42). Four of these items are worn also by the priests: the tunic, sash, cap (instead of a turban), and underwear. The other four items are unique to the high priest's vestments: the ephod, breastpiece, robe and gold plate. The instructions for these special four items are given in great detail. Yet again, as for the tabernacle, the extensive instructions are not sufficiently detailed to accurately reconstruct the vestments. Therefore illustrations in Bible dictionaries and study Bibles of the high priest in his sacred vestments differ. I am very grateful to Robin Haney who has made a full set of high-priestly garments so that we have a real, life-size illustration.

The first item is the ephod (vv. 6-14). It is like a bib with front and back portions, joined together at the shoulders. It's not clear what the ephod was but its importance to the high priest's vestments is indicated by its position first in the list, and by the special material. It is to be made of even more dazzling and precious material than the inner layer of the tent: not only blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine linen, but also gold. Gold is added because the high priest will be able to enter the Most Holy Place, where everything is gold or gold-plated. On the shoulders of the ephod are to be mounted two onyx stones in gold settings. On these stones are engraved the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, six on each stone, in birth order.

The second item is a breastpiece of judgment (vv. 15-30), to be made in the same style as the ephod, of the same five precious materials: fine white linen with blue, purple, scarlet and gold. It is attached to the front of the ephod by gold chains and a blue cord, so as to rest against the high priest's chest. The fabric is to be doubled

over to make a square of one span (9 in.), open at the top to create a pouch. On the breastpiece are mounted twelve precious stones in four rows of three, each stone engraved with the name of a tribe. In the pouch are placed the Urim and the Thummim. There is much mystery about what these were, probably two stones, and about how they worked. They would somehow be used by the high priest to determine God's will for his people. Perhaps a question would be posed to the Lord requiring a "yes" or "no" answer, then the high priest would throw down the two stones to somehow receive the answer.

The third item is the robe of the ephod (vv. 31-35), worn under the ephod. It is all of blue, the most precious color. On its hem are pomegranates of the three precious colors (blue, purple and red), alternating with golden bells. These bells rang as the high priest moved about in the sanctuary, so that their sound was heard.

The fourth item is a small plate of pure gold (vv. 36-38), to be mounted on the turban with a blue cord, so it is positioned on Aaron's forehead. Engraved on the plate are the words, "Holy to the LORD."

The ephod, the breastpiece, the robe and the gold plate: these are the four unique items of the sacred vestments for Aaron the high priest. These are the special vestments that he is to wear when he goes into the presence of the Lord. Three remaining items are briefly listed (v. 39): a white tunic of fine linen, worn under the blue robe, a white turban of fine linen on which is mounted the gold plate, and an embroidered sash.

The vestments for the priests are described very briefly (v. 40), because they are similar to the three items of the high priest's vestments that have just been mentioned. The priests shall wear tunics, sashes and caps. One final item is commanded for both Aaron and his sons: linen undergarments to cover their loins and hide their nakedness (vv. 42-43).

These are the vestments that Aaron and his sons shall wear to serve as priests in the sanctuary. Four of them are unique to the high priest; four are shared by him and the priests. What is the significance of these vestments? What, especially, is the significance of the four special items of the high priest's vestments? Two features stand out: the holiness of the sanctuary that requires these sacred vestments, and Aaron's role as the representative of the people when he serves as high priest.

## God's holiness

God is holy. Therefore he cannot be casually approached by sinful people. God has called Aaron and his sons to serve him as priests (vv. 1, 3, 4, 41). To serve in this capacity they must be consecrated, set apart as holy. And so must their vestments be consecrated, making them sacred vestments. The vestments for both the high priest and the priests are to make "for glory and for beauty" (vv. 2, 40). They are to confer dignity on the ones who alone can approach God's presence; it is a weighty matter to approach the holy God. Their beauty is to match the beauty of God's sanctuary in which they serve. This is true for the priests, and true all the more so for the high priest with his four special vestments.

The high priest bears upon his forehead the inscription, "Holy to the LORD" (v. 36). The Lord had called Israel out of the nations to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6). From the tribes of Israel he set aside the tribe of Levi in holy service to him. From the tribe of Levi he set aside Aaron and his sons to serve him as his holy priests. From the priests he set aside Aaron to be high

priest. The high priest was the pinnacle of a hierarchy of holiness. As the one "Holy to the LORD," only Aaron the high priest could enter before the Lord.

But to enter the Lord's holy presence is a risky thing. It is dangerous for a mere mortal to come before God. There is always the risk of death. Thus the golden bells on the hem of the blue robe. When Aaron ministers, their "sound shall be heard when he goes into the Holy Place before the LORD, and when he comes out, so that he does not die" (v. 35). The ongoing sound of the bells would indicate that he was still alive in the Lord's holy presence. Both Aaron and his sons were to wear the undergarments to cover their nakedness when they entered the tent or approached the altar, "lest they bear guilt and die" (v. 43). It is a dangerous thing to enter into the Lord's holy presence.

## Representation

Although only the high priest could pass through the veil and enter the Lord's presence, he did not go alone. Physically he was alone, but symbolically he carried all Israel with him when he entered in before the Lord. On his shoulders were the two onyx stones with the names of the twelve tribes as stones of remembrance.

**And Aaron shall bear their names before the LORD on his two shoulders for remembrance. (28:12)**

On his chest were the twelve precious stones of the breastpiece, each inscribed with the name of a tribe.

**So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart, when he goes into the Holy Place, to bring them to regular remembrance before the LORD. (28:29)**

When the high priest entered the Most Holy Place to come before the Lord, all Israel was present in him, represented by him. When the Lord looked on the high priest he looked on all Israel as present in him, represented by him. They were all remembered before him. This is part of the high priest's role as the mediator between heaven and earth, between God and his people, between the holy and the unholy.

In the pouch of the breastpiece were the Urim and the Thummim:

**they shall be on Aaron's heart, when he goes in before the LORD. Thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the people of Israel on his heart before the LORD regularly. (28:30)**

However the Urim and the Thummim worked, these instruments for revealing the Lord's will to his people were present when the high priest entered the sanctuary and came before the Lord. The high priest, as it were, presented these instruments before the Lord so that the Lord could place his decisions into them.

On his forehead was the inscription "Holy to the LORD."

**Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD. (28:38)**

This probably means that Aaron brought before the Lord all the holy intentions of the people. They brought their offerings to the entrance to the courtyard: sacrificial animals and other offerings. They brought these with good intentions. Though they may have inadvertently incurred guilt in bringing their holy gifts, consecration was their intent. Aaron brought that intent, under the inscription

“Holy to the LORD,” into the Lord’s presence, so that their gifts win acceptance before the Lord, so that the Lord might be pleased with what his people bring him.

In these four ways the high priest, wearing these four special items of his sacred vestments, bore all Israel with him into the Lord’s presence. He represented them before the Lord.

The one day when the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On this most holy day of the year, the most holy person in Israel entered the most holy space. It was the high point of Israel’s year, its most sacred and solemn moment. The high priest was not to enter inside the veil at any other time lest he die (Lev 16:2). On this day he presented a bull as a sin offering for himself and a goat as a sin offering for the people. He brought the blood of both animals inside the veil and sprinkled it on the mercy seat to make atonement. He made atonement for the sanctuary, for the tent, for the altar of burnt offering, for himself, for the priests and for the people. But having entered within the veil he had to come back out again. The process had to be repeated the next year to refresh the atonement. Why? Because “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb 10:4). God graciously allowed the high priest to take the blood of bulls and goats behind the veil. He graciously granted atonement for the sanctuary and for his people. But in the end this blood could never take away sins. The Day of Atonement had to be repeated again and again. The sacrificial system and the priests who administered it were an elaborate picture of what was to come.

## Jesus, Our Great High Priest

But now “we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus” (Heb 4:14). He “entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12). The priests stood daily at their service, “offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” (Heb 10:11). “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb 10:12). He didn’t have to come back out of the sanctuary. He has offered up the one full and sufficient sacrifice.

But though Jesus sat down, his ministry as high priest continues: “we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places” (Heb 8:1-2). Jesus still serves in God’s presence. He is a minister, a liturgist. His ministry is analogous to that of the high priest in the tabernacle. But whereas the high priest could only serve periodically in the holy places, Jesus serves permanently as a minister in the very presence of God, in the heavenly sanctuary of which the earthly sanctuary was a copy. What is his high priestly ministry? His ministry of offering sacrifices is over; there is no need for him to offer up any further sacrifice. The priestly ministry of mediating sacrifices is over. Jesus the great high priest has done that once and for all. But he remains our mediator. He carries our names into God’s presence.

What does this high priestly ministry of Jesus mean for us? What does it mean for us that we have one present there in the heavenly sanctuary, in the very presence of God, before the throne of grace, ministering on our behalf? He is there as our Advocate. He is there on our behalf.

What this means for sinners is that the one full and sufficient sacrifice has been offered. This sacrifice is able to atone for all sin.

Therefore all sinners can come. There is no sin that this sacrifice cannot atone for. All are welcome to boldly approach the throne of grace in the name of the Lord Jesus and there find forgiveness of sin.

For sinful Christians, we too can approach the throne of grace, for Jesus is our Advocate still. We come in his name, confess our sins and seek forgiveness. Let me remind you of the prayer of confession we prayed earlier:

Gracious God, our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo. Forgive what our lips tremble to name, what our hearts can no longer bear, and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment. Set us free from a past that we cannot change.<sup>1</sup>

I imagine that one way or another that includes all of us here. All of us carry burdens that are too heavy for us to carry. The Lord Jesus invites us to bring them to him, to confess our sins, to find forgiveness, to find mercy at the throne of grace. He is our Advocate, our Friend, our Mediator with God.

When we face any sort of weakness we can pray to him. When our faith wavers we can look to him: our salvation does not depend upon our faith but upon his faithfulness, and he is faithful. When we’re in despair or feeling discouraged, we can pray to him in our hour of need, and find grace to help. Unfortunately after a few hundred years the early church so elevated Jesus, viewing him as the Pantocrator, the ruler over all, high and lifted up, that he ceased to be approachable. The church had to look elsewhere for intermediaries, to Mary or the saints. Instead of going straight to Jesus, they went to Mary, asking her to intercede before Jesus. No, we can go straight to Jesus, our mediator, advocate, great high priest, the one who appears on our behalf before the throne of grace.

Another view is that Jesus is a friendly face who hides us from the angry face of God. No, God beams with pleasure upon his Son, and when he looks on his Son he sees his people, represented in his Son. He sees us. He looks with pleasure on us.

When we need guidance we can approach our great high priest. Just as Aaron carried the Urim and the Thummim into God’s presence, so now we can ask Jesus for guidance. He beseeches his Father and they send the Spirit. The Son prays to the Father; he has his Father’s ear. He “is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25).

When we offer service to the Lord, this too is done in Jesus’ name. Jesus then, as it were, offers it in his name to the Father, so that it be acceptable, just as the high priest brought the people’s intent into the sanctuary under the inscription, “Holy to the LORD.” However feeble and faltering our acts of service done in Jesus’ name, God looks on them with pleasure.

Finally, Jesus is our forerunner. He has entered into the inner place behind the veil, “as a forerunner on our behalf” (Heb 6:20). He is our pioneer, the one who has gone first, our elder brother who has gone on ahead. We too will follow into the very presence of God. Meanwhile he is there on our behalf.

We have no more priests. We need no more priests. We have Jesus our Great High Priest who continues to minister in God’s presence on our behalf. Our names are engraved on him; he carries us into the very presence of God.

This is Jesus, our Great High Priest. Greater far than Aaron the high priest. As Aaron represented Israel before the Lord in the earthly tabernacle, so in a much greater way does Jesus represent us in the

heavenly sanctuary. He has his Father's ear. The Father looks on his Son with pleasure, and he looks on us with pleasure in his Son. We are welcome in God's presence. Therefore, as the book of Hebrews says again and again, we have confidence to boldly approach the throne of grace.

1. *PCUSA Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 88.

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